

The Bassae-Frieze.

200 Years of Guesswork

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SINCE the discovery of the great Greek temples and their architectural sculpture at the beginning of the 19th century, scholars and visitors of the museums in which they are displayed developed a special interest in this kind of sculpture. Scholars have dealt with the sculptures' original arrangement in the temples and the interpretation of the scenes that they seem to represent. These discussions continue to the present day. One of the problematic examples of architectural sculpture is the Bassae-Frieze.

The temple of Bassae was rediscovered in quite a remote and hilly region on the Peloponnese in 1765 and was immediately recognized as one of the best preserved ancient Greek temples (fig. 1).¹ According to Pausanias it was dedicated to Apollo Epicurius for having saved the population from a plague during the Peloponnesian War.² Its frieze was found in 1812, and has now been on display in the British Museum in London for almost 200 years. The ionic frieze was fixed in the inside of the cella, on top of the cella wall (fig. 2). It is 31 m long and 0.63 m high. Twelve of the 23 slabs show an Amazonomachy, the others a Centauromachy. Both themes are quite common examples of mythological battle scenes depicted not only on temples but also on grave monuments, sarcophagi or public buildings. Since there is not any overlap between the slabs, their original arrangement is heavily disputed.

Most figures referred to in the text are available via the links provided in the footnotes.

¹ see Dinsmoor 1933.

² Paus. VIII 41.7–9.

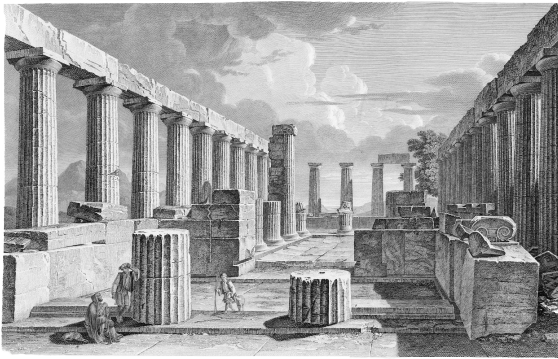


Fig. 1: The ruins of the temple; taken from: Stackelberg 1826, 152

Additionally, scholars have also suggested that the frieze represents mythological warrior-heroes and tried to refer the scenes to myths known from literary sources. Under examination of the slabs a problem arises: there are hardly any iconographic differences between the warriors, aside from different compositions: fully armed, partly armed, or unarmed, they carry different weapons and shields.

An attempt to distinguish the warriors of the Amazonomachy and the Centauromachy is lacking. A particular scene among the Amazonomachy slabs is commonly associated with one of Heracles' labours: obtaining the girdle of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons (fig. 3).³ Heracles can be identified through the lion skin. The V-shaped composition on this, the largest of all the slabs, also attracts attention. This might support interpretation as the warrior-hero Heracles. In contrast to the commonly accepted interpretation, Kenner refers to Plutarch and Diodorus Siculus and identifies the warrior as Theseus, who took Heracles' club.⁴

Another scene is interpreted as Achilles killing Penthesilea who sits on the ground begging for mercy (fig. 4).⁵ The group's composition is redolent of the famous vase of Exekias in London on which inscriptions help identify the Greek hero and the Amazon. This episode is likely depicted on other vases, too, for example in Munich. In both cases Achilles has already wounded his opponent, and, according to the myth, he falls in love with her at the moment when she is finally doomed to die.⁶ Some scholars have noticed that the warrior on the Bassae-Frieze can still spare the Amazon's life, thus contradicting

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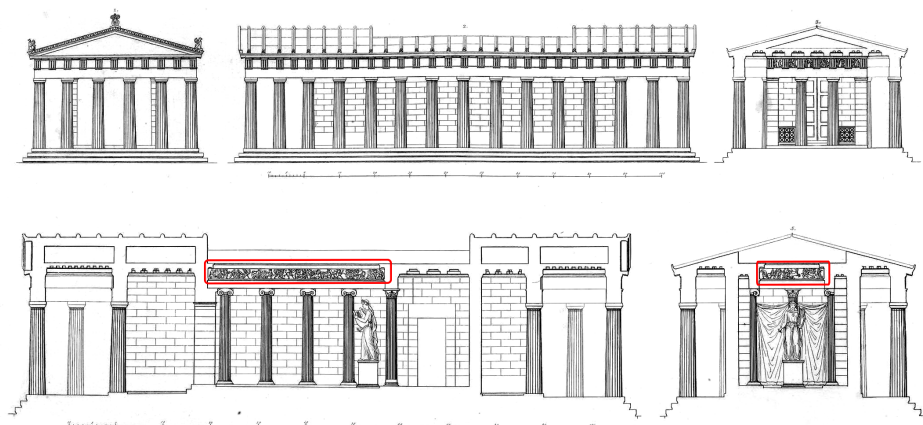


Fig. 2: Section of the temple with highlighted frieze in red; taken from: Stackelberg 1826, 154

³Bassae-Frieze, BM 541. Hofkes-Brukker and Mallwitz 1975, 80–82. Madigan 1992, 76. Jenkins 2006, 145.

⁴Kenner 1946, 47–48; cf. Plut. Thes. 8; Diod. Sic. IV 59.

⁵Bassae-Frieze, BM 537. Madigan 1992, 71–72. Hesitating: Jenkins 2006, 148.

⁶Paus. V 11; Schol. ad Hom. *Il.* II 219; Quint. Smyrn. I.

the mythological tale.⁷ This is why Erika Simon⁸ would like to see Theseus and Antiope in the center of the scene and Hippolyta and Pirithous at the sides. In my opinion, however, we should consider whether the same composition can only be used for depicting a particular myth or whether it can be applied to others also. Besides, one of the warriors who carries a wounded comrade and is followed by an Amazon is sometimes also referred to as Theseus helping his friend Pirithous (and thus the Amazon would be Antiope) (fig. 5).⁹ Theseus has caused a deal of scholarly confusion.

Since we know from literary sources that he took part in an Amazonomachy, scholars are eager to identify Theseus in the scene. The three Amazons riding horses are identified as three Amazon queens such as Hippolyta, Orithyia, Antiope or Melanippe and their conqueror would therefore be Telamon, for example, who overwhelmed Melanippe according to the myth. Nevertheless, Amazons riding horses is not solely a characteristic of an Amazon queen, but a common iconographic motif of that time when depicting fights between Greeks and Amazons.¹⁰ All in all, scholars have referred in their interpretation of the Bassae-Frieze to the well-known Amazonomachy of Theseus at Athens,¹¹ of Achilles during the Trojan War, or one of Heracles' labours.¹² There are even attempts to distinguish two different Amazonomachies within the frieze.¹³ The same thing can be noticed concerning the Centauromachy. In this case, however, two of the slabs bear distinct iconographic attributes supporting a clear interpretation. On one hand, there is the deer-chariot with which Apollo and Artemis approach the fight (fig. 6).¹⁴ On the other hand, there is the immortal warrior Caeneus, who is knocked to the ground by two Centaurs (fig. 7),¹⁵ a commonly accepted iconographic rendition of him.¹⁶

Scholars have desired to identify Pirithous, his wife Hippodameia and his close friend Theseus within the Bassae Centauromachy due to their close association. There have been various attempts to make out the three of them, but in the end, none of these are completely satisfying. Again, there is no distinct iconography used in order to distinguish different persons on the frieze. Sometimes Pirithous is seen in a powerful warrior fighting with a Centaur,¹⁷ sometimes he is spotted together with his wife Hippodameia (fig. 8),¹⁸ sometimes Theseus and Hippodameia when she flees to a sanctuary and he rescues her (fig. 9),¹⁹ and sometimes Theseus and Pirithous are seen as two warriors fighting abreast (fig. 10).²⁰ Conversely the last pair might also depict the Dioscuri, so Castor and

⁷Hofkes-Brukker and Mallwitz 1975, 69–70.

⁸Simon 1998, 122–123.

⁹[Bassae-Frieze, BM 539](#). Hofkes-Brukker and Mallwitz 1975, 89–91.

¹⁰Especially on vase-paintings. See Muth 2008, 394–399.

¹¹Kenner 1946, 44.

¹²Hofkes-Brukker and Mallwitz 1975, 48.

¹³Madigan 1992, 70.

¹⁴[Bassae-Frieze, BM 523](#). Kenner 1946, 42. Hofkes-Brukker and Mallwitz 1975, 60–62. Madigan 1992, 82. Jenkins 2006, 143.

¹⁵[Bassae-Frieze, BM 530](#). Kenner 1946, 44. Hofkes-Brukker and Mallwitz 1975, 46. 58–59. Madigan 1992, 81. Jenkins 2006, 145.

¹⁶Muth 2008, 427–457.

¹⁷[Bassae-Frieze, BM 529](#). Hofkes-Brukker and Mallwitz 1975, 56–58.

¹⁸[Bassae-Frieze, BM 520](#). Madigan 1992, 82.

¹⁹[Bassae-Frieze, BM 524](#). Kenner 1946, 42. Hofkes-Brukker and Mallwitz 1975, 54–55, 58.

²⁰[Bassae-Frieze, BM 526](#). Jenkins 2006, 148 is more hesitant.

Polydeuces.²¹ The setting of the Centauromachy is disputed as well. Some scholars assume that it is the wedding of Pirithous,²² others say it was the Centauromachy, which we know from Homer's *Iliad* took place at the birth of Pirithous' son Polypoites.²³

In short, the Bassae-Frieze has always been understood as an illustration of ancient literary sources and not as an autonomous work of art. Its interpretation varies greatly, according to the direction a scholar's work takes. This tendency is not unique; it can also be observed in the pediments of the temple of Aphaea at Aegina. The pediment's sculptures were found during the excavations in 1811 and sold to Munich in the same year, where they are displayed in the Glyptothek. There are no crossovers between the statues, and the first reconstruction neglected the traces of nails or pins on the pediment that were found during later excavations. Therefore another reconstruction sensitive to this further information was undertaken after the Second World War. The pediments show warriors fighting against each other with Athena in the middle, identifiable through the delineation of the aegis. The pediments are understood as the two Trojan Wars, the east pediment showing the first one with Heracles and Priam, the west pediment showing the second one with Paris and Achilles. Only a few warriors are characterized by iconographic features. In the east pediment, there is a kneeling archer with a suspicious lion-helmet without parallel. This unique helmet reminds us of the lion's skin that Heracles wears and many scholars therefore identify the archer as Heracles. Other scholars are rather careful and interpret this attribute as something that is simply redolent of Heracles, as if to stress the strength of the archer. The identification of the warriors is disputed and one cannot even tell who is a Greek and who is a Trojan. The case is as with the Bassae-Frieze: scholars tend towards 'reading the myth,' and trying to make out the different characters.²⁴

In contrast to the other warriors fighting nude, in the west pediment a kneeling archer is dressed in a Phrygian cap, long trousers and sleeves. The reconstruction of the statue's polychromy revealed that his clothes were very colourful. Thus the statue is frequently identified as the Trojan prince Paris, who is also described as a great archer.²⁵ But scholars have also noticed that Persian clothes are a common iconography of archers in the late archaic period.²⁶ Ohly and Wünsche, former directors of the Glyptothek, stress that their interpretation of the pediments relies on the assumption that the ancient viewer was able to distinguish the warriors easily. But how could they have done so when there is no convincing evidence of any characteristic iconographic attributes? This is why Adolf Furtwängler,²⁷ another former director of the Glyptothek, had in 1906 denied any reference to mythological narratives and regarded the pediments as a collection of heroic battle scenes that the artist was free to design.

The topic of the pediments of Aegina can not be determined as easily as scholars tend to do; but we do not have any problems discerning the broad *themes* of the Bassae-Frieze: an

²¹ Madigan 1992, 79.

²² Kenner 1946, 41.

²³ Hom. *Il.* II 738–744. Madigan 1992, 78–79.

²⁴ Wünsche and Drinkler 2011, 205–213.

²⁵ Wünsche and Drinkler 2011, 213.

²⁶ Furtwängler 1906, 48. Wünsche and Drinkler 2011, 216–218.

²⁷ Furtwängler 1906, 48–50.

Amazonomachy and a Centauromachy. Transferring Furtwängler's idea of anonymous heroic fights to the Bassae-Frieze, we shall have a look at other possibilities to interpret the frieze's content. In 1920, Tarbell²⁸ wrote a short article about both Amazonomachy and Centauromachy, and concluded that they were very popular visual themes due to the possibilities they offer concerning different compositions. Indeed, this is borne out by the great variety of compositions that the Bassae-frieze shows between Greeks, their wives, Amazons, and Centaurs.

In both fights, the parties are represented as almost equal in strength. Five Amazons beat their opponents, eight Greeks defeat Amazons, four fights are not yet decided, and three Amazons and Greeks are wounded. Both parties care for their wounded companions and carry them away from the battlefield. Aside from these signs of companionship, we find traces of mercy or pity. An Amazon tries to restrain another one who is going to kill a warrior, but also a Greek tries to prevent a warrior from killing an Amazon who begs for mercy. It is the same scene that is often interpreted as Achilles and Penthesilea. His forceful pose and her defencelessness need not to be understood as a reference to a particular myth, but rather as a demonstration of supremacy that is combined with some kind of mercy, attributed to Greeks as well as to Amazons. The Centauromachy is balanced, too. Five Greeks overwhelm Centaurs, five centaurs defeat Greeks and the outcome of two fights is not yet foreseeable. There is one dead Centaur, but also two women who are kidnapped by Centaurs. Similarly to the Amazonomachy, Greeks and centaurs support each other. One Greek tries to fight against one of the centaurs attacking the Greek – let us call him Caeneus. One of the centaurs assists another (fig. 11).²⁹ The Centauromachy is further characterised by women who try to flee from the battle. They do not seem to be attacked or even noticed by either warriors or Centaurs. The Centauromachy also provides a scene in which two women flee to an altar and pray for help while a centaur tries to attack them, but is restrained by one of the warriors. We also find such a scene in the context of the Amazonomachy, where two Amazons flee to an altar but are attacked by two warriors (fig. 12).³⁰ In both cases, the holy right of security is violated; on the one hand against Greek women, on the other hand against Amazons.

* * *

Conclusions

The Bassae-frieze illustrates different stages and situations during a real battle; winners and losers, clemency and brutality, brave warriors and fleeing women; but one cannot see (yet?) who is going to win the battle. In 2009, Tonio Hölscher concluded in an article that one must be aware of the architectural sculpture's own characteristics and anomalies when trying to interpret it.³¹ In his opinion, it is superfluous to assume programmes or complicated content, because an ancient viewer lacked the close perspective for visual analysis which we are afforded. For example, the ancient viewer would have had to go around the Parthenon several times until he would have understood it in a way scholars interpret it today. In antiquity, many pieces of architectural sculpture were not visible as a whole and therefore they should not only be examined in their entirety. Thus, we

²⁸Tarbell 1920, esp. 230–231.

²⁹Bassae-Frieze, BM 528.

³⁰Bassae-Frieze, BM 535.

³¹Hölscher 2009, 61–63.

must also take the context of architectural sculpture into consideration when it comes to analysing its content, because according to Hölscher, architectural sculpture is a rather sophisticated kind of artistic decoration.

Concerning the temple of Bassae, we find an Amazonomachy and a Centauromachy arranged with mythological scenes encouraging the sacral and mythological atmosphere. In both cases, Greeks fight against barbarians, hence civilisation against wild nature, order against chaos. In my opinion it is futile to try to name the different warriors, if we cannot be certain; it is more important to notice that both sides are equal in strength and that it is not yet certain who is going to win. However, Apollo and Artemis advance; they will assist the Greeks, which is why they will gain a victory. Just like the plague, from which only Apollo was able to save the people of Bassae, the Greeks can only win the battle against the barbarians with the help of Apollo. For this interpretation, references to certain myths are unnecessary. As shown, the frieze rather seems to focus on the different stages and situations occurring during the battles (violence, support for other combatants and so forth). Most of the aspects or interpretations presented here were already noticed by different scholars but have never lead to an analysis of the frieze's content not based on literary sources.

In the end, I cannot and do not want to exclude the possibility that ancient viewers saw certain heroes in some of the warriors, even though I myself see neither the need nor even always the possibility to do so. I could imagine that – just like modern scholars – the ancient viewers were reminded of particular myths or stories and that their interpretation may also have varied quite a lot. Nevertheless, an identification of each single person in the frieze cannot have been the intention of the sculptor.

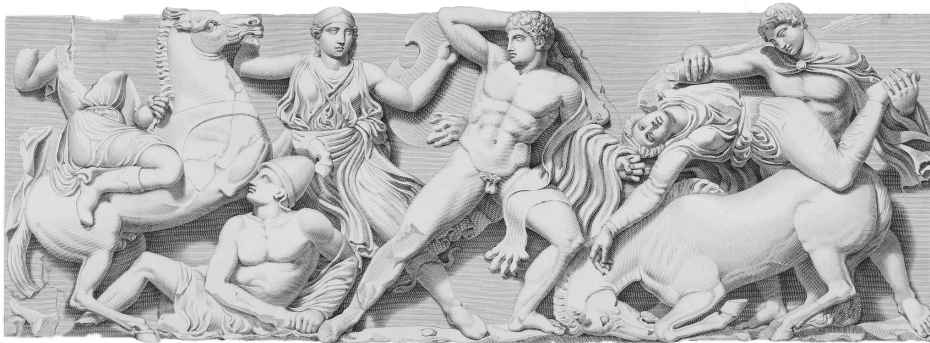


Fig. 3: BM 541; taken from: Stackelberg 1826, 163



Fig. 4: BM 537.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 160



Fig. 5: BM 539.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 167

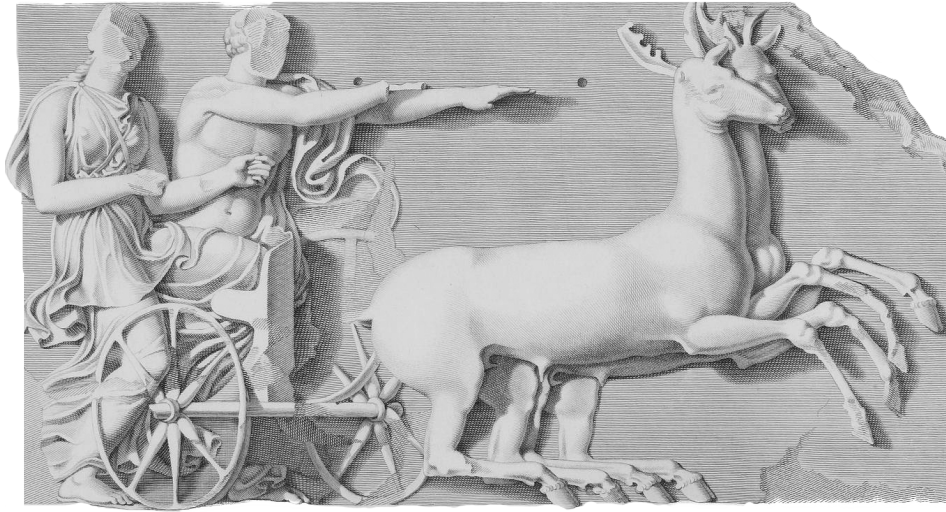


Fig. 6: BM 523.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 168

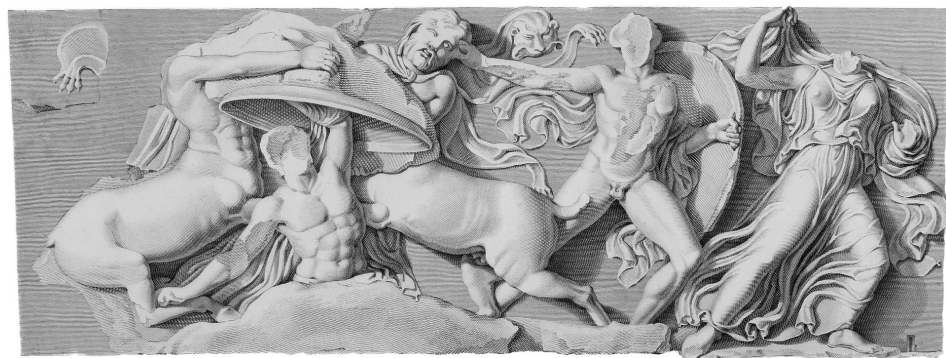


Fig. 7: BM 530.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 175

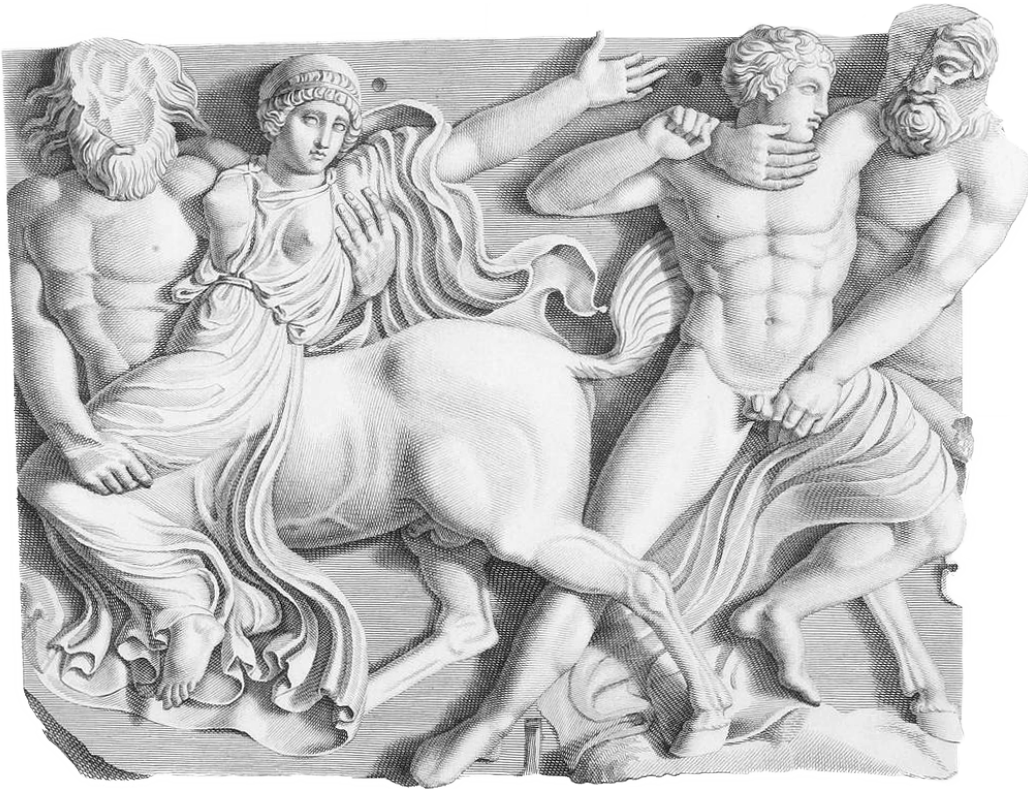


Fig. 8: BM 520.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 174



Fig. 9: BM 524.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 178

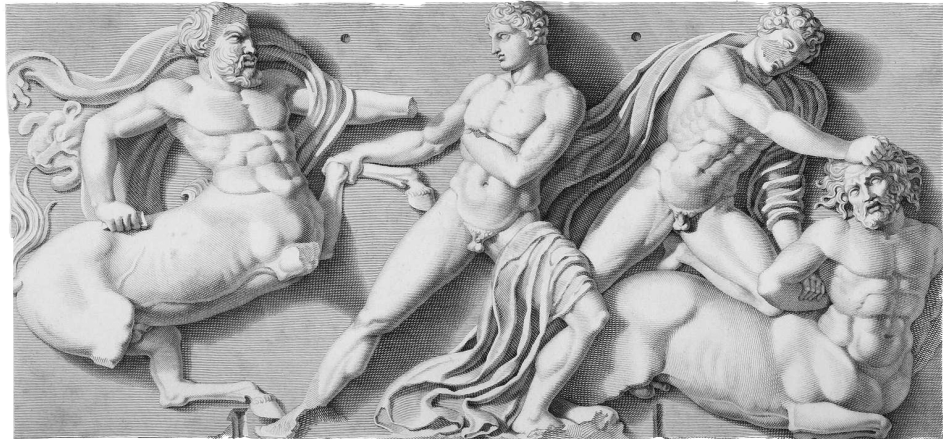


Fig. 10: BM 526.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 176

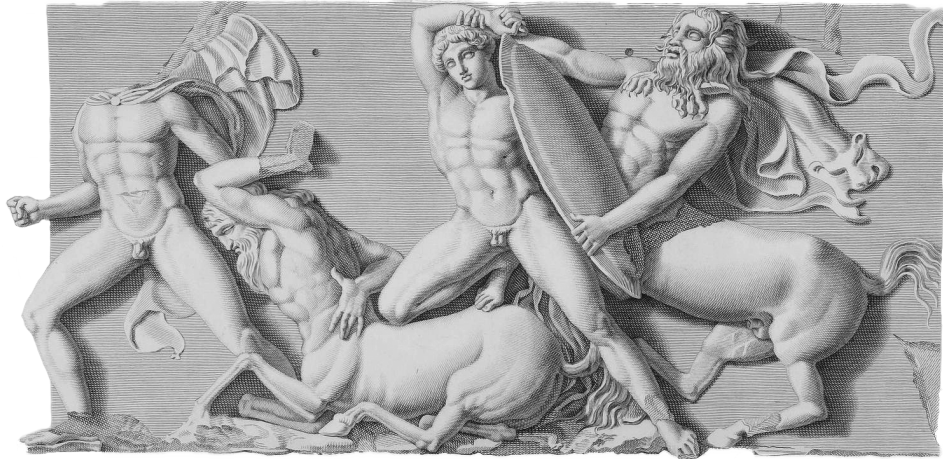


Fig. 11: BM 528.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 171



Fig. 12: BM 535.
Image from: Stackelberg 1826, 165

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Abbreviations of ancient authors and texts are according to The Oxford Classical Dictionary.

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